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French, Pursuing Nazi SS Chief, Stymied in Bolivia

By Peter J. Bernstein
Newhouse News Service

Paris—A diplomatic scandal is brewing over a beautiful girl, a wanted Nazi who reportedly worked for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, and an unyielding South American dictator.

The Nazi, say French and German police authorities, is Klaus Barbie, a Gestapo chief, now said to be living a rich life in Bolivia under an assumed name.

His wartime record in France, where he signed an order transferring 41 Jewish children to the gas chambers at Auschwitz, is lurid enough to make President Georges Pompidou of France demand Barbie's extradition in a formal communication.

But Hugos Banzer, the Bolivian strongman who rode to power last year in a military coup, has turned Pompidou down. He claims Bolivia does not have a normal extradition treaty with France and prosecutes no crimes older than 20 years.

Despite Banzer's intransigence, the Bolivian Supreme Court is weighing evidence that Barbie used fraudulent papers to obtain Bolivian citizenship. If his citizenship is nullified and the Bolivian strongman relents, Barbie may eventually face a warcrimes tribunal in France, thanks to the relentless efforts of a German girl who dug up the evidence.

Beate Kunzel, daughter of a Protestant working-class family in Berlin, was a 5-year-old girl when the Nazi Gestapo chief sent the Jewish children to Auschwitz.

Now 33 years old and married

She got a year in jail for the incident, but was released after four months. Since then she and her husband have been gathering data on the hundreds of Nazi war criminals who have gone unpunished.

"All these criminals were rehabilitated and occupy high posts, which is like declaring their crimes were nothing, and may be done again," she says.

Lyons 'Hangman'

At the top of her list is Barbie, known as the Hangman of Lyons, who was twice condemned to death in absentia by French courts for his wartime activities.

Barbie had been Gestapo chief in Lyons in the German occupation and was convicted of having committed 4,342 murders, of sending 7,591 people to the gas chambers, and of arresting thousands of French resistance fighters. Among the many who died in Barbie's hands was Jean Moulin, the leading martyr of the French resistance, who was tortured to death.

Both Mrs. Klarsfeld and French and German authorities maintain that Barbie has been living undisturbed for the last 20 years under the name of Klaus Altmann. They say records show that he obtained false travel documents in 1951 through an International Red Cross organization in Rome and escaped to South America.

His claim that Klaus Altmann was a minor German SS officer during the war who never murdered anyone was made to look ludicrous by the exhaustive research done by Beate Klarsfeld.

Besides identical fingerprints and looking alike, authorities

of Klaus Altmann, who acquired a Bolivian passport and Bolivian nationalist status 14 years ago. Barbie's marriage date also is the same as Altmann's.

The chief key to the identification, Mrs. Klarsfeld says, came when the International Red Cross in Geneva, in a rare breach of its normal secrecy over identification matters, acceded to her request and released the fingerprints, identity card, photograph and signature under which Barbie-Altmann traveled to South America in 1951.

Mrs. Klarsfeld turned the information over to the French, who had given up on Barbie in 1950. German records, she said, indicate French officials had twice questioned Barbie in an American intelligence office near Augsburg after the war, but the American occupation authorities refused to extradite him.

According to the London Sunday Times, Barbie worked regularly for American as well as Bonn intelligence after the war. It was while working for the CIA the paper said last month, that Barbie was sentenced to death in France.

The Gestapo chief is said to have handed over to the CIA for its secret files a list of prominent Frenchmen who collaborated extensively with the Gestapo during the occupation. The French, the article said, were not allowed by American authorities to question Barbie in detail after the war, and then only in the presence of CIA agents. The article added that it may have been with CIA help that he got his false Red Cross passport in 1951.

Mrs. Klarsfeld is determined to keep the spotlight on Barbie no matter how many obstacles bar her way.

She has gone to Bolivia twice in the hope of presenting evidence to authorities there and to

second visit last month she was arrested three times and held for extensive questioning.

A Possible Killing

Interviewed recently in their modest Paris apartment, both Beate and Serge Klarsfeld doubted that the Gestapo chief would be extradited.

"If there is a bad decision by the Bolivian courts or if the state refuses extradition, it will be necessary to kill him," said Serge. "If we can't arrive at a just decision by legal means, we will use extra-legal means."

But they acknowledge that the chances for killing or kidnapping Barbie are not good. He is living in a luxury suite of a private clinic in La Paz, the Bolivian capital, and police are guarding him for fear of such an attempt.

The Klarsfelds, together with three friends, tried to kidnap another Gestapo boss in West Germany last year, but the attempt misfired. Their intended victim, Kurt Lischka, now a successful businessman in Cologne, was chief of the Nazi police in Paris. A top SS official in Hitler's Gestapo, he was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment by a French court for his role in the deportation of 100,000 French Jews to concentration camps.

He is one of about 1,000 German war criminals who were condemned in absentia by French courts but so far have eluded prosecution.

After the kidnapping attempt misfired (Lischka is a big man despite his years and resisted and police rushed to his help), Mrs. Klarsfeld showed up at the local justice department, armed with a dossier on the Gestapo chief and admitted her role in the attempted kidnapping.

HCD reviewed: not responsive NWC Disclosure Act

Auschwitz, she first drew international notice in 1968 when she slapped the face of Kurt George Kiesinger, then chancellor of West Germany, as a